

Choosing Wisely

| Jennifer Zurko

>> Published Date: 8/28/2013



Isaac Brantingham didn't grow up in this business. But, he kinda did.

Let me explain.

Isaac displayed his nurturing side when he was a small boy, helping mice, squirrels, rabbits and other innocent victims that were assaulted by his grandmother's cat. He had his own veterinary clinic in his bedroom, where he would nurse them back to health.

This need for taking care of something turned toward the plants he picked at an abandoned house near his home in Virginia, where he would take his wheelbarrow and bring back daffodils, hyacinths, forsythia and wisteria to plant in his yard.

After a few years of collecting flowers, Isaac's mother decided he needed his own place to grow his plants, so she bought him a small windowsill greenhouse and a nurseryman was officially born. From there, Isaac would

build his own 10 ft. x 10 ft. greenhouse with a corrugated plastic cover, complete with small benches and an irrigation system with a timer. He learned how to grow plants from seed by reading books and through trial-and-error, eventually giving them to neighbors and friends from church.

"I had so much fun in that greenhouse," Isaac recalls. "I told my parents, 'I could really see myself doing this.' I didn't have any family that was in the business or even know anyone that had been in horticulture, but I loved doing it and I was sure there was a way to make a livelihood doing it."

After two years at a local community college, Isaac went to Virginia Tech University to study horticulture. He moved to Maryland to intern at Denison Group, a large landscaping company, but his heart was in the greenhouse ... and his home state of Virginia. Through the university, Isaac found out about a growing position at Riverbend Nursery in Riner, Virginia, and he applied. That was in 2006, and in June of 2011, Isaac was promoted to Head Grower.

No regrets

Easy with a smile or a laugh, with a slight hint of a Southern drawl, our Young Grower winner for this year didn't have the luxury of being handed a growing job by a family member. But Isaac says not growing up in the industry was an advantage.

"I had the opportunity to choose this livelihood for myself, so I never question why I'm here," he stated. "I chose this for myself. I really enjoy what I do. I definitely had support, but no one encouraged me to do this. We're kind of a small group as nurserymen and I'm really proud to be in that group and that I got to make that decision for myself."

Isaac started his career as a Section Grower, growing Riverbend's large offering of perennials and groundcovers. The company started as strictly groundcovers 29 years ago—smaller sizes, like 2 in. and 2.5 in. and quart pots. But now, Riverbend handles more than 1,500 perennial varieties in sizes from 2.5 in. to 3 gal. Isaac and his team do grow some seasonal color, like pansies and mums for fall, but they pride themselves on being perennial experts for their IGC and landscaper customers.

To make things interesting—and to diversify their lineup a bit—Riverbend owner Jim Snyder decided to become a LiveRoof licensee, growing plants for the green roof company. Now, Isaac and his team of growers produce plants for green roofs that go on buildings in Virginia, Washington D.C., Maryland and North Carolina. Last year, Riverbend Nursery produced 150,000 sq. ft. of plant material—mostly sedums—for LiveRoof. Since it's now a permanent part of their business, they're producing their own stock at all three of their growing locations.

"It's come a long way in a really short period of time," said Isaac. "We've made a lot of mistakes in that time, but we've learned so much as far as efficiencies and how to take care of the plants between cutting and planting to make sure we don't develop any disease during storage."

The LiveRoof business has allowed Riverbend to work with a broader customer base; partnering with contractors, architects and roofers are now part of the company's regular operations. And when things slow down with the perennials, Riverbend's employees stay busy with the green roof projects.

Sedums and perennials and bears, oh my!

As head grower, Isaac has four different section growers reporting to him, all of them in charge of a specific area. Audrey McReynolds helps him with the 1.5 million perennial plugs Riverbend produces annually, along with their PGR applications. Isaac maintains 3 to 4 acres, while Margie Belcher and Rebecca Dabney handle the rest of the nursery—about 85% of Riverbend's products all together. And Greg Howell handles the sedum stock for the LiveRoofs, harvesting the cuttings and maintaining the stock beds. Isaac grows and finishes the modules.

"All of the growers here are very team oriented; I don't have to micro-manage any of them," said Isaac. "I feel like I have the best growers in the world, but the sales team, the operations team, the shipping team, maintenance, production—we all just work really well together. There's no sense of this department is pitted against this department. Everyone really is a team here and no one wins if one of us loses.

"It's really a lot of fun to be a part of [a team] like that. I really feel so fortunate because this is my first job out of college. I haven't worked anywhere else except the landscaper I worked for five years before I went off to school. And to find this right off the bat, I really feel blessed."

While overseeing all of the growing, Isaac also takes on new challenges, like Riverbend's new IPM program, which he and Rebecca are working on together. Isaac explained that their biological program is still in its infancy stage, but they've been testing them in four propagation houses and plan on expanding as they get a better handle on it. Oh, and Isaac is the one they call when a black bear has been spotted on one of the properties, which seems to happen every year.

Isaac—wood worker, problem solver, inventor

Isaac's mission is to always find a solution to any problem, which he says he gets from his father.

"My dad's the kind of guy that if anyone has a problem or doesn't know how to do something, they ask him and he can tell him how to do it or he'll figure it out pretty quick," said Isaac. "I don't think I'm as inventive as he is, but I definitely feel like I inherited that from him."

As a child, he would tinker in the workshop with his dad, building small pieces of furniture, birdhouses and other things out of wood they would take from the scrap pile at a local furniture plant. Growing up without a television made this young man more curious and motivated to be creative.

Which has now carried over into his career at Riverbend. Jim Snyder, who nominated Isaac for the Young Grower Award, wrote on the application: "He is personally very inventive and has tools that he will only let a few folks use lest his patent-pending ideas get stolen." Isaac's repertoire of homemade tools include upgrades on traditional pruning shears, a plant vacuum that removes debris, fancy gadgets for taking cuttings from stock plants, and a new ergonomic tool that moves flats from one place to another without straining neck and arm muscles, which he's been working on for a few years. He's in the process of applying for a patent.

And it doesn't stop at work. Isaac also likes to work in his garage during his spare time, building and crafting new trinkets and tools for the house.

Isaac laughs and says, "It's funny, when we have friends over, my wife will walk people through the house and say, 'Isaac made that and Isaac made that ...'"

Life changes

Isaac will soon be testing his woodworking skills to build a crib for his newborn baby, which he and his wife Meghan are expecting in January. This new venture in their lives will offer new challenges, but luckily, they live on the Riverbend property, so it will be easier for Isaac to juggle work and home life. (So don't be surprised if you see Isaac walking around the greenhouse with a baby strapped to his chest in a BabyBjörn come this spring.)

But the Brantinghams are used to a busy lifestyle. Along with their large circle of friends, Isaac and Meg are very involved in multiple church groups and travel quite a bit. Living near the river has offered Isaac the chance to become an expert fly fisherman and kayaker. And not only does he tend to plants during the day, but he walks home every night to work in their extensive home garden, canning and freezing the vegetables after harvesting. Isaac and Meg also raise chickens (for meat and eggs), quails and honeybees. And they've trained their German Shorthaired Pointer Otter to hunt grouse with them in the fall.

Although Meg had to be converted into enjoying a more rural lifestyle, she and Isaac share the same pleasure from learning new things.

"Meg and I are the same way. If we think of something that we want to do, we'll just get a book, read up on it and do it," said Isaac.

A flexible future

In his Young Grower Finalist essay for the June issue of *GrowerTalks*, Isaac said, "This industry demands creativity and forward thinking from the people that wish to be a lasting, successful part of it." He believes that the mantra of "we always did it this way" isn't a sustainable way to be viable in this industry. The best way to accomplish this is by being flexible and embracing change.

"On one hand, you have to juggle what you've always done well and keep moving that forward. And on the other hand, you have to constantly be working for the next product that might appeal to that new generation and trial those new varieties or trial that new equipment that might make your staple product even better," said Isaac. "Years ago, after talking to guys that have been in the industry for a long time, it used to be really easy to produce a perennial and sell it and make a profit. But there are a lot of people out there doing it very well now and you really have to be a step above to continue to be successful and to make a profit."

In order to do this, Isaac and his team will continue to discover new ways to market their products or try something new by adjusting to changes as they come.

“Here at Riverbend, Jim is always challenging us to think: what are we missing? What product do we not have that we should?,” said Isaac. “[LiveRoof] was a huge commitment and a big change. It has been a great decision and we’ve all benefitted from that. But we’re not thinking, ‘Well, that’s it. We’re done.’ There are probably 100 more things like that out there that we’ll discover, hopefully, if we’re paying attention, that will give us an edge and that will be appealing to the customer 10, 20, 30 years from now.” **GT**